

## EXHIBITION ESSAY

COBI COCKBURN

*PRIMARY LINES*

By Alexander Boynes

As a child growing up in the bush capital in the 1990s, I was ecstatic when my parents took me to the United States. For me, the pinnacle was New York, the pop-culture capital of my young world. It became clear very quickly, however, that my parents' idea of a cultural highlight was not mine, as the many art galleries we visited soon confirmed, with me often trailing along in reluctant protest.

One particular visit, though, has never left me. Arriving at the gallery, I was led into a large, spare room occupied only by a vast central ottoman on which people lay sprawled, silently gazing upwards at what appeared to be a luminous blue painting set into the ceiling. We found a place to lie down and look. The colour was astonishing, but only for so long. Outside was New York, electric with the promise of movie stars, rappers, breakdancers and graffiti-covered trains, and here I was being asked to stare at a blue rectangle. Then something shifted. A tiny white form pierced the edge of the blue field and moved slowly across it. A passenger jet rearranged my understanding in real time, transforming what I had taken to be a static surface into an opening onto immeasurable depth. The work was James Turrell's *Meeting*, though I only came to know that later. What remained with me was the experience itself: the recognition that perception is never fixed, and that, given time, apparent simplicity can become spatial, unstable and immense.

That memory feels like a fitting way into Cobi Cockburn's work, not because the two practices are identical, but because both depend upon perceptual change brought about through duration. *Primary Lines* does not deliver itself all at once. It asks the viewer to remain with light, line and interval long enough for orientation to shift, so that edges sharpen and soften, colour gathers and disperses, surfaces hover between objecthood and atmosphere, and space begins to feel less given than continuously produced. Nothing here depends upon revelation in any theatrical sense. What matters instead is a slower recalibration through which the body, the eye and the work gradually come into relation.

Cockburn's formation spans Sydney College of the Arts and Canberra's Glass Workshop, one of the most rigorous training grounds for the medium in the country. Shaped by the legacy of Klaus Moje and generations of exacting practitioners, it approached glass not simply as a craft medium, but as a serious contemporary visual language.<sup>1</sup> Since those formative years, Cockburn has carried that discipline forward without ever allowing technique to harden into display.<sup>2</sup> The intelligence of the making is unmistakable, yet it disappears into something quieter and more elusive, where precision does not pin meaning down but keeps it open and bodily felt.

That quality is inseparable from place. Karen Finch's early writing situated Cockburn's practice in relation to Canberra and the Shoalhaven,<sup>3</sup> while Kiama, within the Illawarra, is now home, where escarpment, sea, atmosphere, quarrying, freight, labour and steel remain folded into the same horizon.<sup>4</sup> In such a place, landscape and industry do not

remain separate for long – each enters the meaning of the other. Sergei Eisenstein’s line, “At the intersection of Nature and Industry stands Art,” feels unexpectedly close to the world from which these works emerge.<sup>5</sup> Cockburn’s art does not illustrate that proposition in any literal manner, but it lives near it. Her lines may suggest the meeting of sea and sky at the horizon, but they may also register engineering, interruption, measure and incision. Light can feel atmospheric and structural at once, so that the work holds these terms in suspension rather than resolving them. In *Primary Lines*, glass becomes the medium through which light, line, interval and bodily relation are set in motion. The exhibition has been described as moving through “the expressive language of line and colour,” surveying “the transitory space between known subject matter and visceral associations.”<sup>6</sup> That description is apt, but what feels most striking is how fully these works unfold in time. They are not images to be quickly decoded so much as situations to be entered, and their restraint is not neutral. It slows the viewer, delays certainty, and asks perception to keep adjusting.

Cockburn’s own words bring the project into especially sharp focus. In her accompanying text for *Primary Lines*, she describes a research shift that treats light itself as material and, by reducing the visual language to light and line, allows the work to be shaped through encounter.<sup>7</sup> It names, with unusual precision, what these works do. Light does more than illuminate form; it discloses and unsettles, bringing boundaries forth only to loosen them again. Line is not merely descriptive either; it marks direction, interval, edge and measure, yet it never settles into one role for long. Together they generate a spatial field that resists resolution, and that resistance is what keeps the work alive in time rather than closing it down into instant legibility.

Perception in these works is never a passive act, never simply a matter of receiving what is placed before the eye. As Rudolf Arnheim argues, it is an active grasping of relationships, tensions and wholes.<sup>8</sup> That feels especially apt here, where Cockburn’s practice is shaped less by singular forms than by subtle shifts between opacity and translucency, stillness and vibration, exactitude and drift, surface and depth. Nothing is surrendered all at once. Instead, the eye is slowly retuned through small adjustments, and what first appears restrained or spare begins to gather charge. Ambiguity, in this context, is not a lack of clarity, but a kind of pressure, the means by which the work continues to open.

That slow opening also sits close to Jonathan Crary’s writing on attention, with its insistence that perception is historical, temporal, and bound up with the conditions of modern life.<sup>9</sup> In a culture shaped by speed, distraction and the ceaseless circulation of images, attention is never neutral. Cockburn’s work seems to understand this deeply, and answers it by proposing another tempo altogether. Rather than competing with the saturation of contemporary image culture, it quietly steps aside from it, making room for duration, so that the viewer is not dazzled or overwhelmed, but gradually recalibrated. Its force lies there, in the way it changes as attention deepens.

A particularly resonant way into this encounter comes through Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s line that “the body is our general medium for having a world.”<sup>10</sup> Cockburn draws on this in her writing on the work, where it informs her emphasis on embodied perception and on

installations in which “the body becomes both participant and measure.”<sup>7</sup> That idea feels very close to the experience of these works, which do not end at the retina, but unfold through angle, distance, movement and time. What first meets the viewer on entering the gallery is never quite the same as what emerges after a pause, a sidestep, or a return. Perception here is not fixed reception, but something lived through a body moving in space.

This concern with encounter and duration also runs through Cockburn’s earlier writing, including *In the Vicinity of White: a study of emotion and belief within abstraction*. There, she describes abstraction as a means of bridging “the material and abstract elements of our world” and even as a form of “silent faith for the artist.”<sup>11</sup> The phrase gives another register to the reserve and concentration of the present work. What these reduced forms hold is not formal economy alone, but the possibility that line, colour and light might carry feeling beyond description. Elsewhere in that text, Cockburn writes of “the ongoing questioning of self, belief, existence, and faith,”<sup>12</sup> a deeper current that continues to run through *Primary Lines*, though now in a language pared back even further.

The long enquiry into white provides one of the clearest bridges between that earlier body of thought and the present exhibition. In the abstract of that earlier text, Cockburn writes that *In the Vicinity of White* explored “the potential of colour and abstraction as stimulative artistic devices that spur human emotion beyond the inherent constraints of reality,” while researching the “historical, personal and emotional attributes that surround the colour white.”<sup>13</sup> White, in that account, is never emptiness, nor is it purity in any simple formal sense. It is historical, conceptual, emotional and spiritual at once. Later she writes that the project is “not purely a quest for the ‘ultimate white’” but a study that explores white’s roles “within art, existence and faith.”<sup>14</sup> The movement into *Primary Lines* feels less like a departure from those white works than a passage through them, with light now taking on a more explicit structuring force.

The terms of that movement are articulated with unusual clarity in her discussion of Agnes Martin. Cockburn describes Martin’s paintings as “intimate personal expressions that explore the depths of psychology and wellbeing through abstraction,” before invoking Martin’s sense that the grid stands “half way between a rectangular system of coordinates and a veil.”<sup>15</sup> The image of the veil feels especially resonant here, because Cockburn’s lines do not simply measure or divide. They soften, hover and partially withdraw, establishing order without closure and holding the work somewhere between system and atmosphere, between structure and passing light.

Her reflections on Mark Rothko are equally telling. Writing of the Seagram Murals, Cockburn recalls being, in her words, “Silenced by the vision,” unable at first to define what she was responding to, before finding herself exposed to “the raw potential of abstraction” and left asking whether art might be “the search for something far greater? A form of silent faith?”<sup>16</sup> It is a question that does not need to be answered literally in the present work to remain active within it. One feels it beneath the restraint, beneath the refusal of overstatement, and beneath the sense that these works are carrying more than they overtly declare.

These affinities are not decorative references, but part of the conceptual and perceptual field from which Cockburn's work emerges. Her earlier writing places figures such as Agnes Martin, Rothko, Barnett Newman and Ralph Hotere within that terrain of thought, while her citation of Larry Bell's remark that "the solid object, the measurable glass, is only the beginning of the experience" comes close to a key for her own practice.<sup>17 18</sup> In Cockburn's work, too, the glass remains exact and worked, yet never ends with itself. It opens onto something less fixed and more perceptual. Newman's *Stations of the Cross* feels especially resonant here, not only in its seriality, but in the way meaning unfolds through bodily movement. In Cockburn's case that encounter is quieter, but no less exacting: one adjusts, reorients and returns, and meaning arrives not in a single moment of recognition, but through the slow accrual of perceptual change.

This insistence on presence also gives the recent work a particular urgency. In an accompanying text, Cockburn situates *Primary Lines* within a culture in which perception is increasingly mediated and displaced from direct encounter, arguing instead for the urgency of physically situated experience.<sup>7</sup> You can feel that conviction in the work itself, which resists instant capture and asks for something quieter and more demanding: patience, stillness and the willingness to stay long enough for an image or structure to emerge differently. At the same time, the most illuminating framework for Cockburn's practice is no longer only the history of studio glass, even though that history remains close at hand. Her work now moves across a broader field of postwar abstraction, perceptual art and spatial installation, where geometry never turns cold and lyricism never loses structure.

That tension became especially palpable in the long enquiry into white, and it remains quietly active in the more recent turn toward colour and light. In Aimee Frodsham's framing of *Pink Moon* at Canberra Glassworks, Cockburn's move into colour followed "the last twenty years" of exploring "the emotional and spiritual connections to the colour white," with colour now serving "as a metaphor for the human experience of being and feeling."<sup>19</sup> The shift did not abandon the earlier work so much as draw out another register already there, and *Primary Lines* feels like the continuation of that measured distillation.

One of the most beautiful passages in her writing on the work returns to childhood, recalling light first appearing beneath the lens of a photographic enlarger, "both present and fleeting, shaping perception before I could name it."<sup>7</sup> The image feels less like anecdote than origin, and it helps explain why light in Cockburn's work is never merely effect, but something formative that reveals and withdraws, steadies and disperses, and gives structure to experience while remaining intangible. In that sense, *Primary Lines* feels less like a departure than a further deepening: more reduced and more spacious, more exact and more tender. Like the jet stream drawing a line across an infinite expanse of blue, these works do not ask to be solved so much as stayed with. They trust repetition and restraint to sharpen sensitivity, and in a moment ruled by speed, distraction and endless image traffic, they offer another tempo, one in which light quietly reorganises the space between body, memory and thought.

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## NOTES

1. Michael Agostino, *The Australian National University School of Art: A History of the First 65 Years* (Canberra: ANU eView, 2010), chap. 14.
2. FUSE Glass Prize 2022 Catalogue (Sydney: JamFactory and Australian Design Centre, 2022), artist biography for Cobi Cockburn.
3. Karen Finch, "Cobi Cockburn," *Artlink* 28, no. 2 (June 1, 2008).
4. Seven Marks Gallery, "Cobi Cockburn," artist biography, accessed April 8, 2026; Dominik Mersch Gallery, exhibition text for *Primary Lines*, quoted in Cobi Cockburn, "Primary Lines: Light as a Structuring Force in Contemporary Practice," draft PhD statement, unpublished typescript, 2026.
5. Sergei Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 63.
6. Dominik Mersch Gallery, "Cobi Cockburn: *Primary Lines*," exhibition page, accessed April 8, 2026.
7. Cobi Cockburn, "Primary Lines: Light as a Structuring Force in Contemporary Practice," draft PhD statement, unpublished typescript, 2026.
8. Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, expanded and revised ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).
9. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 147.
11. Cobi Cockburn, *In the Vicinity of White: a study of emotion and belief within abstraction* (MFA thesis, Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, 2016), 6.
12. Cockburn, *In the Vicinity of White*, chap. 3.
13. Cockburn, *In the Vicinity of White*, 5.
14. Cockburn, *In the Vicinity of White*, 5, 41–42.
15. Cockburn, *In the Vicinity of White*, 15–19.
16. Cockburn, *In the Vicinity of White*, 18–19.
17. Cockburn, *In the Vicinity of White*, 2–3.
18. Larry Bell, quoted in Cockburn, *In the Vicinity of White*, 26.
19. Aimee Frodsham, curatorial text for *Pink Moon*, Canberra Glassworks, 2024.